

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 15
Year A

On Breaking Boundaries

[RCL] Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

This week we continue our Pentecost tour through Genesis, Romans, and the parables and stories of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. We have two unsettling encounters: the meeting of Joseph and his brothers, and the meeting of Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

The Genesis stories of our founding fathers and mothers are often perplexing. In the last weeks, we have heard Jacob steal his brother's birthright, deceive his father Isaac, and flee from his brother's anger. We have heard Laban deceive Jacob, substituting his daughter Leah for Rebecca in the bridal tent. We have heard Joseph's brothers conspire to kill him and sell him into slavery in Egypt. Yet God has kept his promise to Abraham, and continued to bless the children of Israel. God's love, we have learned, is unconditional.

The character of Joseph is as complicated as that of his father Jacob. Sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers, he has risen to a position of power in the palace of Pharaoh through his skill as an interpreter of dreams and a political advisor. He has predicted a seven-year drought and helped Egypt prepare by storing a quantity of grain. Unaware of Joseph's position, his brothers have come to Egypt from drought-stricken Canaan to buy some grain. They do not recognize Joseph, who sells them the food, but then practices some deception of his own. He secretly hides a silver cup in the sack of his younger brother Benjamin, so that it will appear that the brothers have stolen from him. In an act of supreme irony, he demands that the brothers leave Benjamin with him as his slave. At this point, brother Judah begs Joseph to let him stay in Benjamin's place, because the loss of the child of his old age will surely kill their elderly father. This is where today's reading begins.

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, who are understandably horrified and afraid at this turn of events. Joseph responds with this spin on their attempt to get rid of him: it wasn't you who sent me to Egypt, but God, who sent me before you to preserve life. And indeed, if Joseph were not in Pharaoh's house, the children of Israel would succumb to famine and die out. Once again, God has saved the children of Israel.

This passage is sometimes read as one of forgiveness and reconciliation, as Joseph forgives his brothers and the family is reunited. The fact that Joseph is revealed as a

manipulator and deceptive character, setting his little brother Benjamin up for a charge of stealing, makes one wonder about this interpretation. As an individual, Joseph is hard to love. In this story, Joseph appears as a difficult character, playing a role in the larger story of God's love for God's people, Israel.

Today's passage from Romans confirms that God never rejects God's people. Paul points out that he is a member of the tribe of Benjamin. The passage might even be read as being addressed to Joseph by Benjamin. Even though you, Joseph, and the children of Israel have been disobedient, the gifts of God are not revoked. God is merciful, always, to everyone.

The story of the Canaanite woman's faith has a problematic element as well. Jesus has crossed from Galilee into the district of Tyre and Sidon, which is gentile territory. A woman begs for mercy and healing for her afflicted daughter, recognizing Jesus as Lord and Son of David. Jesus, once he deigns to answer her, gives an unsettling reply: I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Not to an outsider, a woman, a Gentile. Even when she kneels before him, implying worship and a deep understanding of his divine status, he refers to her and her daughter as dogs. Yet she persists, again addressing Jesus as Lord, and insists that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table. Not only does she see clearly who Jesus is, but also she understands how great is his power to heal. God's mercy is abundant; God's healing and love overflow; there is enough for not only the children of Israel, but also for the entire world.

Let us assume that we are not dealing with grouchy Jesus in this passage, but rather with teaching Jesus. Jesus is illustrating for his disciples that true faith is persistent and open-eyed, and extends to a wider world beyond the Jewish community. Here it's helpful to look back at his explanation of things that defile, which precedes the story of the Canaanite woman's faith.

The Pharisees and scribes have challenged Jesus, asking why his disciples do not wash their hands before they eat. They imply that Jesus and his disciples are breaking the traditional purity laws. Jesus replies: It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out. What goes into the mouth is flushed out into the sewer; it is a passing, temporary uncleanliness, unimportant. What comes out of the mouth comes from the heart. Evil intentions such as murder, theft, and lies are what truly defile.

In today's reading, Jesus has crossed the boundary between the land of Israel and gentile territory. He has redefined boundaries of what is clean and what is unclean, and he has redefined the boundaries of the kingdom of God, extending the kingdom beyond the borders of Israel. What comes from the heart of the Canaanite woman is faith: faith that

God's love and God's mercy extend to all. In today's passage from Genesis, Joseph's brothers have crossed the boundary from their home in the land of Israel into Egypt to discover to what lengths God will go to preserve the house of Israel. Both stories remind us of the greatness of God's love and mercy.

Reading these two stories during the season of Pentecost, when we celebrate the role of the Church in the work of God in the world, reminds us that God is constantly entering new territory and breaking boundaries. God's work, and the work of the Church, is to meet outsiders and grant them a place at the table. It comes down to remembering that we are all God's children, that God's love is unconditional, and that God's mercy extends beyond all boundaries. So perhaps reading today's passage from Genesis as a story of reconciliation is not so far-fetched after all!

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! Amen.

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